

research snapshot

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Firefighters Don't Have a Leg up in Labour Relations – They Have a Ladder

What is this research about?

Since the 1970s, neoliberal governments – such as the Harris government, which came to power in 1995 – have worked to erode public care services in Ontario. Nurses, paramedics, and other public care workers have been hit hard with cutbacks and job losses. They have seen full-time work scaled back or eliminated altogether. As public safety workers, however, firefighters have escaped mostly unscathed. Research shows that firefighters are relatively well-paid, and have very secure full-time work. They don't put in unpaid overtime, and they're often without enough work to do. They are part of permanent teams; responsibilities are shared and worker safety is a priority. In 2007, they quietly negotiated a solid three-year contract with the City of Toronto – a municipality that told other workers it had no money to offer them. Firefighters' unions continue to enjoy strong membership.

But nurses also engage in life-preserving work and, if anything, are in higher demand than firefighters. Yet, nurses make less than firefighters and deal with more work on a day to day basis. They are also required to have three to four more years of pre-work training, which they have to pay for. (Firefighters, on the other hand, undergo most of their training while receiving a wage.) So why do firefighters occupy such a privileged position in the public sector compared to nurses?

What you need to know:

Firefighters, as public safety workers, are privileged compared to public care workers like nurses. But they haven't been unaffected by neoliberal policies. These policies have increased their work and put them at odds with the public care sector. To ensure quality services and strong labour conditions, unions could work together and not simply protect their own interests at the expense of other workers.

What did the researcher do?

Susan Braedley, Project Manager, MCRI Long-term Care Project at York University, looked at how firefighters in Toronto have managed to hold onto a privileged labour position in the face of neoliberal assaults on the public sector.

What did the researcher find?

A number of things have helped protect firefighters from the policies of neoliberal governments in Ontario. Throughout history, firefighters have been supported by insurance companies and other institutions that have an interest in securing private property. (Firefighters, in battling fires, pose a benefit to insurance companies who might otherwise have to pay out claims.) Firefighters also enjoy a public image that has made them attractive to politicians seeking a photo-op. Although the images of police and the military have taken a beating, firefighters are

still looked on as masculine heroes. (In poll after poll, theirs is the most trusted occupation, occasionally edged out by nursing.) This public image, especially since 9/11, has helped them in their labour struggles. So, too, has the fact that most firefighters are white. That said, firefighters themselves have done a great job of organizing. They have been careful to protect their interests.

But neoliberal governments have had an impact on firefighters. Firefighters, to be sure, have benefited from amalgamation. But they have also been at odds with those conservative policies that put a premium on productivity and efficiency. Fire departments, after all, need to stand ready. This means firefighters, when not fighting a fire, cannot be occupied with too much other work. What they produce, in a sense, is 'readiness.' Also, it's difficult to measure the efficiency of firefighters by what they save. (It's far easier to quantify the loss of life or property caused by a fire.) Nevertheless, in recent years, fire departments have been under more and more pressure to justify their budgets. Firefighters, looking to protect their jobs, have also accepted some of the duties of emergency services workers. This has threatened the livelihood of paramedics, who have seen more and more of their work offloaded onto firefighters.

How can you use this research?

Although they have benefited from market-based policies, firefighters' unions have also felt the impact of these policies in the form of increased work. They need to work with other, less advantaged unions – such as those that serve paramedics – to help ensure equitable labour for all. Workers in both the public care and safety sectors need to be valued and protected.

About the Researcher

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